

Is positive education another fad? Perhaps, but it's supported by good research

August 2 2018, by Cath Ferguson



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Positive education is a spin-off from [positive psychology](#). Prominent psychologists such as [Martin Seligman](#) and [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) were instrumental in its creation, initially in 2000.

Positive psychology employs a strength-based approach to mental health

and wellbeing. It focuses on a number of aspects such as resilience, general wellbeing, and happiness.

So, is positive [education](#) another fad in education? The answer is "perhaps", as nothing is static in education. But positive psychology [research](#) indicates long-lasting benefits for young adults.

What is positive education?

The concept has support from a range of prominent psychologists and practising teachers. The idea is the wellbeing of students enhances learning and develops them as good citizens.

A [good school](#) doesn't just aim for its students to achieve their academic potential. It also aims to develop them as caring, responsible and ultimately productive members of society.

Seligman developed the [PERMA](#) model, which identifies the five things necessary for wellbeing. PERMA stands for positive emotion (P), engagement (E), relationships (R), meaning (M) and achievement (A). Positive psychology moves away from a deficit approach to mental health (what's wrong with the individual) to a proactive wellbeing approach.

As a spin-off from positive psychology, positive education has been [defined](#) as "education for both traditional skills and for happiness". So, positive education is based on best teaching practices to help students achieve their best academic outcomes, paired with aspects from positive psychology that promote [student](#) safety and wellbeing.

It does work

Positive psychology interventions [include](#) decision-making, coping skills,

problem-solving skills, relaxation and creative brainstorming. Using these in positive education improves mental health and life satisfaction, reduces depression and anxiety and improves academic success and creative thinking.

International [research](#) indicates positive education does work. This has been conducted by reputable researchers through universities with good reputations.

The author's analysis of the academic literature indicates positive psychology interventions support a strength-based approach for students. For such interventions to be available in schools, [school](#) leadership needs to adopt the positive education perspective.

There is nothing in the research to suggest the positive education approach has any negative outcomes. But outcomes may vary between schools.

Differences in the training, support for and by staff, and resources available, together with the demographics of the student population may affect outcomes. The only prediction that can be made is that positive education enhances student academic performance and wellbeing.

Geelong Grammar School is a good example

Some public schools in Australia have already adopted the positive education approach. But the schools involved in the [published research](#) in Australia are generally prestigious schools with the resources to train staff appropriately and provide additional resources to support the framework.

The most-cited Australian example is Geelong Grammar School, the first Australian school to adopt positive education. This school has

undertaken a whole-school approach across all years of schooling with age-appropriate interventions.

Geelong Grammar staff have been trained to provide appropriate positive [psychology](#) interventions – decision-making, coping and problem-solving skills, relaxation and creative brainstorming. Interventions may also include enhancing gratitude for what one has and taking action to improve the lives of others.

The school has continued contact with Professor Seligman.

Positive education is growing in Australia

The growth of positive education in Australia is evidenced by the establishment of the [Positive Education Schools Association](#) (PESA). PESA started in 2011 with nine member schools and now has over 100 school members across Australia.

Internationally, groups such as the [International Positive Psychology Association](#) and the [International Positive Education Network](#) exist to promote positive education.

Can we implement it system-wide?

Generally, the published [research](#) has been conducted in schools that would be described as prestigious and/or in a middle-to-upper-class locations. Students are generally from middle-to-upper-class families with access to good resources, and life isn't usually a daily battle for survival.

It's likely schools with many students from low socio-economic families or with traumatic backgrounds would benefit from positive education.

The effects might be even stronger in those schools, assuming the schools provided appropriate support and training for staff and leadership.

It takes time to develop the school culture necessary to implement positive education effectively. Teachers have to be trained to work with [positive psychology](#) interventions. A stable school leadership with belief in positive education is needed to ensure its effective adoption.

The time and money required to introduce positive education may hinder its full introduction to every school. These challenges are likely to inhibit the development of positive education across the government school sector. That is, unless state education departments take the concept on board and support it with appropriate training and resources.

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